

Developing dance students' awareness of how to enhance their learning in dance

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Background and rationale

Students can study dance at the University of Wolverhampton as a specialist subject, or within a combined awards programme. Dance is often combined with education, drama, sports studies and music. Before being offered a place, all applicants show their dancing skills in an audition and, in an interview, are given opportunity to talk about their dance experiences. From this information the School has learnt that they may have several years' experience in ballet, tap, modern or Latin American dancing. Often they have gained awards given by recognised dance associations such as International Dance Teachers Association or Royal Academy of Dance. They may have studied dance at GCSE or A level focussing on choreography and appreciation of dance works, as well as contemporary dance technique. Even those students choosing to study as specialists come with different starting points from which to begin their graduate studies.

What was the issue?

A major feature of the dance programme at the University of Wolverhampton is the inter-relationship between the practical and theoretical study of dance. This requires students to develop a range of academic and personal skills to support their practical studies. In order to study dance as an art form, knowledge and skills for choreographing and critically appreciating dance are needed. An understanding of other art forms is also incorporated into this creative process. Working independently of tutors in students' own study time is another feature of their experiences as graduate students of dance. They work in groups, often assuming the role of teacher as well as student.

When acknowledging the diversity of students' dance experiences and recognising their strengths and limitations, course staff became concerned to discover what skills and strategies they need to develop in order to be more effective in their learning.

What was the reason for the research into practice?

Students' evaluations have shown that the first year of study can be difficult—it requires students to be more independent in their learning. In order to equip students to be effective learners across the breadth of the dance studies programme, tutors need to identify and promote the development of the skills and strategies needed for learning in dance.

Dance students have often been trained by the traditional method of teaching, which focused mainly on teachers passing on their knowledge of the technical skills necessary to enable learners to perform with conformity in the dance styles. These pedagogical strategies have been handed down from leader to follower. (Alter 2000) 'Copy me, follow the corrections, accept my assessment of your ability and performance' can lead to limited knowledge and understanding of dance and to limited skills and strategies for learning. As a learning activity refers to a very general level of operation, the learning outcomes can be enhanced by the use of learning strategies suited to the individual. A learning strategy is a set of one or more procedures that an individual acquires to facilitate the performance of a learning task. These can be stored and used in further learning situations. Performance in a learning task is linked to the development of the learning strategy, the learning process and individual differences. The learning outcomes eg. levels of understanding, acquisition of knowledge and development of skills, reflect success or failure in strategy formation (Nisbet and Shucksmith 1986 in Ridings 1998).

However, the skills for receiving and processing information are central to the success of a learning strategy and can be developed though the use of different teaching methods.

Miller's framework of teaching methods identifies three styles of transmission (cited by Stigler and Hiebert in Alter 2000). Using the command style teachers transmit their knowledge 'to receptive and untutored students'. However, transaction is seen in activities where students work with others at their own pace, using given material. The transformational style is shown in activities which require guided discovery and problem solving; here the learner's internal knowledge, feelings, skills and experiences are balanced by teacher initiation of subject content for the

class. It is intended that by involving our students in active reflection on the learning process, promoted by a range of teaching styles, they will be more effective as learners in dance.

Those students who follow a series of modules which focus on teaching dance in education need to appreciate a range of teaching styles. Here the focus is more on the creative process to stimulate and structure individual expression than on the training process to replicate given dance styles. If effective teaching relies on using skills and understanding of how to present information which students can receive and use to further their learning, teachers need to transform their knowledge of the subject matter of dance into teaching that fosters students' learning (Bannon and Sanderson 2000).

In the modules focusing on teaching dance students are required to develop an understanding of dance as an art form—as a means of appreciating and expressing ideas in dance. At the center of dance in education is the relationship between creating, performing, evaluating and appreciating (National Dance Teachers Association 2001). Dance focuses on the development of the individual through increasing aesthetic awareness. To this end opportunities are given for the development of the reasoning processes, increasing the students' perceptual and conceptual range, in an atmosphere of exploration. However, many of our students' experiences as learners in dance had not introduced them to this process.

'If we are serious about dance education within the school setting and the preparation of professional dance educators, current dance educators must engage in the difficult identification of the knowledge-base required for competent teaching, and develop the materials and strategies to transfer this to students.' (Brooks Schmitz 1990 in Fortin and Siedentop, 1995, p.3)

The research

The research took the form of a case study into the use of a range of learning strategies and resources to highlight students' learning in the module 'Teaching and Learning in Dance'. Knowledge of students' perceptions of learning was supported by information from questionnaires. Interviews were held with 2 focus groups with 3 students in each, to explore students' responses to key research questions. Each group spoke with the author twice, during the first, then during the second half of the semester. These interviews were loosely structured to address the key research questions (see appendix 3).

Action taken in preparation for the project.

1) *Questionnaires* were given to 12 students for them to record their reflections on their dance experiences (see appendix 1). Nine students taking the module returned questionnaires. Six of the nine questionnaires showed that the respondents regarded themselves as teachers of dance as well students and performers. They were not starting out as novice teachers. This was taken into account as the starting point when planning the weekly programme.

2) *An assessment was made* of the students' skills as shown in assignments completed at end of Semester 1 in technical performance, choreography, researching and presenting written work, presentation skills, group interaction, lesson planning. After comparing students' performances in this assessment and their evaluations of the modules *four research questions* were selected as they had a direct relevance to the students' understanding of themselves as learners and teachers. They were also central to the learning outcomes for the teaching and learning module to be taught.

1. What do students understand by the term 'learning'?
2. What do students recognise as evidence of how well they are learning?
3. In what forms do individual students prefer to be given information to promote learning?
4. In what forms do individual students prefer to be use the information so they develop understanding?

The innovations

Planning activities for learning

The central focus on developing an understanding of learning, and the skills which can promote this, was emphasised in all taught sessions. An overview of the concept of an individual's cognitive style was discussed i.e. an individual's preferred and habitual approach to organising and representing information during learning and thinking activities (see appendix 3). Ridings (1998) states that an individual's cognitive style is dynamic and learning strategies can be used to develop this. Students reflected on the learning activities which catered for the two principle dimensions of the styles: the analytical-wholistic dimension when information was organised in a series of

parts or presented as a whole; the verbal-imagery dimension when information was represented verbally or in the form of pictures to address (Cooper 2000). The balance between active learning and reflective learning was addressed through time given for guided reflection on their understanding of the skills and process for learning in both practical work, discussions, application of theory to practice and the experience of teaching peers and pupils in school. Links were made continually between learning activities in lectures and assignments for assessment.

Redesigning assignments

Assignments and supporting materials were redesigned to enable students to use a variety of skills for presenting learning eg. students were to give a presentation to show examples of their experiences on video when teaching dance in school and discuss this with the tutor. Key questions were to be answered during the presentation.

To require students to address the needs of the National Curriculum the school placement was structured tightly, indicating the teaching methods and materials to be used by students. This information was built into a template to be used by them when planning lessons.

Criteria for assessment were presented as grade descriptors so work was assessed against understood criteria which in themselves served to offer one way of communicating the expectations (see appendix 2).

The outcomes

What signs do students recognise as evidence of how well they are learning?

From interviews all seven students stated that getting higher grades is the main means by which they recognize that they have learnt.

Three students mentioned that their ability to be able to remember information was major feature in their learning.

Others saw that changes in the way they used past, as well as new, information was an indication of learning eg. changes in the way they use speed, body extension and flow when performing and an awareness of more ease with which they are able to perform. This practical area of their studies appears to be the most important to them for they see that their physical performance underpins all their studies. It gives them a reference point for concepts referred to in choreography, teaching and academic studies.

What do dance students say they need in order to learn?

Eight 2nd year dance students expressed the need to feel confident in order to be motivated to learn. This confidence is generated by certain environmental factors which affect the means in which the information is given.

In what forms do individual students prefer to be given information?

This confidence is dependent on support given by tutors and fellow students.

In practical activities most students prefer information given visually—in demonstration by tutors so they can observe and recognise the criteria for assessment. However, their responses to verbal instruction, imagery and questions to promote more self-assessment is improving. They reported that they gained much from using video to identify dance styles and different teaching styles as this provoked good discussion and evoked confidence in their skills for recognizing key points. They prefer personalized feedback from tutors. Feedback from peers in reciprocal teaching is not taken seriously as they are reluctant to ‘criticise’ others. Thus they appear to shy away from independent learning in practical work.

Four students expressed reluctance to use the grade descriptors to assess their work. This may be due to the fact that this material were not prepared in time to be referred to when discussing the assignments. One student stated that she found it gave ‘too much to read’ and another that it was ‘written in too good English’. Two students were able to use these to refine their work and to make a valid self-assessment of both their written assignment and presentation.

They need to develop skills and strategies for conceptualizing their learning. They appreciated having the outline of lecture content given on handouts. Information was given in a variety of forms eg. in pictures, handouts, worksheets, video material. Students then recorded their experiences using preferred methods. The effective use of symbols accompanying terminology was comments on by four students. They had begun to use these symbols in their note taking. The work sheets given to support their note taking and help them make direct links between lecture content and assignments have given them more confidence in knowing they had made an accurate record of information.

In what forms do individual students prefer to use the information so they develop understanding?

Here the emphasis was on looking for meaning, by relating and organising ideas and using evidence and logic to develop a deeper approach to learning (Fazey and Lawson 2000). They found this aspect of their studies demanding.

Insecurities in their abilities to gain information and make personal interpretations from their reading are shown in requests for questions to be given to direct them to the key points for the assignments. They asked for time in lectures for class discussion of their reading to discipline them to read and to develop the students' thinking when comparing their ideas with others' (Cooper 2000). One student's module evaluation stated that she preferred not to prepare a written assignment over a vacation as this denies her contact with a tutor. Only this student, who is dyslexic, appeared to have begun working on the written assignment early. This enabled her to prepare work for a tutorial and discuss drafts of her written work before submitting work for assessment.

Students did use recommended texts and written information given out in lectures to develop their basic understanding of the key concepts to be explored in the essay. As a result the grades ranged from A14 to E4 for this assignment in comparison with that of C10 to E3 for the Special Needs module in Semester 1. However, when providing examples from practical dance activities to discuss the issues in their essays there was an over-reliance on the examples discussed in lectures, even though more credit was to be given for the use of student's own examples.

To promote discussions of theory and practice the activities in pairs proved stimulating, eg. matching a selection of quotations to support or contradict practical experiences in lecture. A QAA assessor recognised some of the students' limited competence in their verbal communication skills and in their use of movement terminology. Working in pairs gave opportunities to explore understandings and use terminology in a safe environment and thus build confidence. The use of flow diagrams to plot the development of the discussion and creating a model also helped support students' recall (Cooper 2000). To highlight the place of reading in the researching of an essay a quotation from a core text was incorporated into the title. Thus the discussions had a direct link with the strategies needed for preparing the written assignment.

When applying information, gained from reading and discussion, to the essay title the essay structure was not helpful to all students. This structure appeared to override the discussions and which were recorded in pictorial form and flow diagrams in earlier lectures. Questions given to guide their reading were found to be helpful.

The instructions for the school placement and presentation were made very prescriptive. As a result their teaching did appear to incorporate more of the strategies for learning than demonstrated by previous cohorts of students taking this module. The task of selecting edited sections of a video recording of their teaching, was very effective in leading them to watch, discuss, reflect on and evaluate their teaching and learning. However, interviews revealed that the group placement supported some students' learning, but were felt to handicap others'. There were discrepancies in individuals' contributions to the group assignments and in the level of challenge which individuals imposed upon them. One student, a specialist student, had decided to prepare the lesson plans and presentation herself saying 'This was quicker...and I made sure we included everything I wanted to show'. Group members did choose sections to present.

Students experienced less stress when describing and discussing their placement when being assessed as a group and stated that they felt more 'confident' than when presenting individually. However, allocating a separate grade to individuals proved very difficult. One student's comment that 'a "C9" grade is all I want' came as a surprise and disappointment to the other students working in her group. The system of peer assessment gives students opportunity to inform markers of any differences in levels of contribution. Students' comments showed that they rarely take advantage of this as they see such actions as disloyal. Students who would like to work with different people find problems in achieving this, for there is a general resistance to varying the composition of their groups for assignment tasks.

Benefits

This research has provided information on students' dance backgrounds, their perceptions of their needs and abilities for learning and the varying degree of independence which they feel confident to assume, in their studies. The research questions strengthened the focus on developing the students' learning as a prerequisite to developing their teaching of dance. As a result, a tighter link was made between all learning activities and the requirement of the learning outcomes and assessment criteria and a wider range of resource material was prepared. This also served to indicate to students the standard to aim for in their own work...as students and teachers

How will the research findings become embedded in practice?

- the induction programme is to be revised to highlight the different learning and teaching methods which will be used in the dance studies
- another module is to be designated as a core module to focus on a range of learning strategies though use of varied teaching styles in practical and academic studies
- more opportunities for students to review progress are to be incorporated into learning so that the assessment can be seen as a relevant, credible and coherent on-going conversation between learner and teacher
- exploration made into how to assign individual grades to students for their contribution to group assignments
- the results and resources of this project will be shared with other teaching staff to highlight a wider range of skills and strategies for learning

Evaluation

A variety of activities and resources were used to highlight specific learning strategies. However, this required students to acknowledge their need to develop their study skills. The short intervention period gave very limited opportunity for students to develop skill and thus be able to evaluate their effectiveness; the students' attention was directed to the process of achieving the learning outcomes of this and other modules which often caused them to resort to established working practices. This research would benefit from running over a longer period and across modules running concurrently. This might then give more time to increase the students' awareness of the research and direct their focus on how effectively they are learning as well as what they are studying.

In order to cater for different cognitive styles and preferred learning strategies a greater range of resources would have offered more choice of routes through the learning activities. This would have encouraged students to take decisions relating to their own learning and thus become more independent group work has promoted some supportive relationships between students. However, more time spent on promoting individual responses to the tasks before students become involved in group-work could have highlighted the need for them to take more individual responsibility for achieving the intended learning outcomes.

Conclusion

The aim of the project was to encourage students to engage in a long-term process of building strategies for learning which are meaningful and productive for the wide study of dance. This has highlighted the need for early intervention into the students' perception of themselves as learners in order to develop their confidence and encourage them take more responsibility for themselves as learners. This requires teachers as well as students to explore the relationship between learning skills and strategies. To this end the teaching of study skills and learning strategies need to be given a higher focus in all modules Teaching which included differentiate activities could give opportunity for students to choose different learning strategies and plan intervention activities which will enable students to recognise the progress they are making. By examining and redressing the balance between activity, reflections and feedback students can be encouraged to reflect on their experiences at a deeper level and recognise their personal learning needs. The recognition of their needs is the first stage in generated changes in the teaching and learning in dance.

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Appendix 1. Research into Students' Learning in Dance

Background information for dance student survey

In filling out this questionnaire, you will remain anonymous. Please provide the following information:

University Year.....Age..... Dance Specialist Dance Minor

Tick any and all that apply to you now: *Circle any of these you desire to be in the future.*

Do you feel you are a dancer dance student choreographer teacher.....

Dance Background

Age you began to dance

Age began to study dance in a class or studio

How many years have you been dancing performingChoreographing
teaching attending performances

How often in the week you dance?

In how many performance did you take part last year1999/2000?

How many performance did you see last year? In university theatre.....
In other theatres

How many years have you been studying the following styles?

Years studying: **Modern** **Ballet** **Jazz** **Tap** **Ethnic forms (eg.. Irish, Flamenco)**

In Studio:,
In School/univ,

Improvisation recreational dancing. learning to teach

In Studio:,
In School/univ,

Current serious interest in the arts: List approximate *hours per month*

I actively do:	As an audience member:
Acting	attend plays in theater
Singing	watch plays on TV.
theater	go to galleries, museums
production work	attend shows, galleries
drawing, painting	attend readings
sculpting, jewelry making, ceramics	watch films at cinema or on TV.
poetry writing	attend musical concerts,
photography, filmmaking	listen on music on radio, or TV.
fiction writing	listen to jazz
play a musical instrument	
improvise or write music	

Appendix 1

University of Wolverhampton Dance Studies

The instructions for filling out the open-ended questions:

In answering these questions, please express your ideas in any form which helps you say what you really feel. You don't need to write in full sentences nor do you need to pay attention to grammar and spelling.

QUESTIONS

1. How and when did you start dancing?
2. Why do you dance?
3. Describe your experience in and feelings about improvisation.
4. Describe your experience in and feelings about choreographing.
5. Describe your experience in and feelings about performing.
6. Describe your experience in and feelings about teaching.
7. Describe your experience in and feelings about dance in at weddings or at other family occasions.
8. Describe your experience in and feelings about dance in social and recreational settings such as at parties, clubs, discos.
9. What are the most negative aspects of your dance experience?
10. What are the most positive aspects of your dance experience?
11. What are your future goals for yourself in dance?
12. Describe your experience with and feelings about dance on TV. and in film.

Thank you for participating in this study and contributing to a greater understanding of the role dance plays in dance students' lives.

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Appendix 2

University of Wolverhampton Assessment criteria for presentation at Level 2 DC2201: Teaching and Learning in Dance

A Category

A lively enthusiastic presentation. Clear learning objectives promote knowledge and understanding of selected movement content. The tasks focus on specific dance skills and lead individuals to adapt initial material to create individual responses. Progression is made from performing then **refining** simple dance actions incorporating varied movement concepts and/or group relationships. Opportunities are given for appreciating, performing and composing dance material. This leads to the creation of a dance phrase(s) Good demonstration and verbal articulation in instructions and teaching points and questioning. Resources and stimulus are used to help learners recall information and refine their performance. The conclusion establishes what learners have achieved. Good time management and smooth transitions between contributions are made by all group members.

B Category

A lively enthusiastic presentation. Learning objectives promote exploration and refinement of selected movement content and the tasks identify the dance skills which focus on these. There may be little opportunity given for individual to generate personal responses. Progression is made from linking simple actions then incorporating varied movement concepts and/or group relationships in the creation of a dance phrase(s). Time is given for observing, performing and composing. Good demonstration and articulation in instructions and teaching points. There may be limited planning of questions to check learners 'understanding. Resources are used to help learners recall information. Conclusion establishes what learners have achieved but may be merely from the teachers' view point. Time management and contribution of all group members has been carefully planned.

C Category

The presentation conveys an interest in the topic. A sound analysis is made of the movement potential in the stimulus. The learning objectives are stated but the tasks set do not focus tightly on these. Lesson plan gives content and management is shown but there may be some confusion or omissions when progressing from simple to more demanding movement tasks. Some teaching points are given to develop actions, movement concepts or group relationships. Resources are used as stimuli but there is limited reference to these in order to promote quality of movement or individual responses. A faster or slower pace of presentation would hold audience's attention. Limited evidence of planning as a group.

D Category:

The presentation conveys limited interest and confidence in the topic. A stimulus is used but the analysis of movement potential refers only to either actions or movement concepts or group relationships. The learning objectives are vague but do refer to movement. There will be some limitations and confusion in the use of demonstrations, teaching points and articulation. There will be some disjointed delivery. Limited evidence of planning as a group.

E Category:

There is a poor choice of stimulus and little analysis of the movement potential; no appropriate learning objectives; little evidence of activities to develop actions and concepts; no awareness of tasks to generate individual responses to the stimulus; no evidence of time management; poor use of resources in the activity; poor demonstrations and articulation and difficulties in clarifying confusion.

F Category:

There is an inappropriate choice of stimulus, poor analysis of the movement potential no evidence of progression in actions or concepts, no evidence of resources. The presentation is difficult to follow. There is no evidence of time management, little evidence of group involvement.

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Appendix 2

SSPAL GENERIC ASSESSMENT GRADING FOR WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT

Level 2: Adapted for Dance studies Dc2201

A 16 A15, A 14, First

Outstanding Performance

- Outstanding work of excellent quality. Shows an exceptional ability to analyse and inter-relate the concepts in the title and apply this knowledge to theories (stages in the learning process and creativity).
- Shows considerable evidence of critical, balanced thinking with some originality when exploring the issue using practical examples and reading to illustrate the strengths and limitations of the arguments.
- Evidence of the wide reading some of it beyond the recommended texts and journals.
- Logical and fluent discussion with each paragraph offering clear development of one idea and making links to previous and following paragraphs.
- Clear link between introduction and conclusion. Very sound grammar, spelling and sentence structure

B13, B12, B11

Upper Second

above average - very good

- Work of high quality. Shows an ability to analyse and inter-relate the concepts in the title and apply this knowledge to theories (stages in the learning process and creativity).
- Recognises the issues which arise from analysing and inter-relating the concepts.
- Shows critical, balanced thinking with some originality when exploring the issue using practical examples and drawing on wide reading of texts and journals to illustrate the strengths and limitations of the arguments.
- Logical and fluent discussion with each paragraph offering clear development of one idea and making links to previous and following paragraphs.
- Very few careless errors in grammar, spelling and sentence structure.

C10, C9, C8

Lower Second

Average – good

- Competent in identifying the key concepts in the title and relating these to the knowledge of relevant theories (stages in the learning process and creativity).
- Recognises several of the issues which arise from analysing and inter-relating the concepts. Mainly descriptive with some lack of fluency in the discussion.
- Shows sound, balanced thinking with references made to a limited range of recommended texts and journals when exploring the issue using practical examples to illustrate the arguments. Relies solely on material explored in taught sessions.
- Weaknesses in essay structure. Paragraphs do not offer clear development of one idea and links to previous and following paragraphs are weak.
- Some careless errors in grammar, spelling and sentence structure.

D7, D6 D5

Third

Satisfactory Performance

- Competent in recognizing the key concepts in the title but the structure of the essay is weak; it is not geared to showing how these relate to relevant theories (stages in the learning process and creativity).
- Recognizes several of the issues which arise from limited analysis of the concepts and practical examples. But mainly descriptive with very little evidence of inter-relating concepts and of critical thinking leading to a balanced argument.
- Lack of fluency in the discussion. Paragraphs do not offer clear development of one idea; links to previous and following paragraphs are weak.
- Few references made are made to a limited range of recommended texts and journals. D5 if consistent errors in grammar, spelling and sentence structure.

E4 & E3

Marginal Fail

- Shows some ability to identify the issue which arises from the study of the key concepts,
- but the work is lacking in critical thought with little reflection on reading and on practical examples.
- Bibliography is given but limited evidence of appropriate reading.
- Poor structure with consistent errors in grammar, spelling and sentence structure.

F1 & 2

Fail

- Little or no evidence of application of knowledge, ideas and concepts to the topic.
- Poorly descriptive. Totally inadequate evidence of reading from appropriate sources. No bibliography.

A study into students' perception of the skills and strategies they use for learning in dance.

1 What do students understand by the term 'learning'?

2 What signs do student's recognise as evidence of how well they are learning?

- Movement patterns: Can recognise, copy quickly, remember, perform with less physical and mental effort, describe, explain.
- Considering new Ideas: Recognise links between concepts/ideas, interpret and use new vocabulary, answer questions, suggest examples, suggest and discuss conflicting views.
- Seeing value in new ideas: becoming excited, confused, anxious.
- Being willing and able to put new ideas and movement material into practice.
- Peer approval
- Tutor approval; body language; feedback – corrections, praise, encouragement; grades.

3 In what forms do individual students prefer to be given information?

Visually – demo, symbols

Verbally – spoken or written instructions, explanations, teaching points

Whole - show whole

Sequential – learning in parts

When involved in:

- physical activity,
- observing and reflecting,
- listening,
- discussing
- group activities

4 In what activities do individual students prefer to use the information so they develop understanding?

- Supervised practice/discussion
- Independent practice/discussion
- Guided exploration
- Problem solving tasks.
- Observe own performance on video
- Discuss performance with tutor, peers
- Comparing information from different sources -independently, with others in lectures